

John 3:1-21

Which new character are we introduced to (v. 1)? Nicodemus. **What do we know about Nicodemus?** He was a prominent Jew, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin (like a Jewish Supreme Court), and a highly respected teacher of the Old Testament Scriptures. He had impeccable credentials/pedigree. He was extremely religious!

When did Nicodemus come to visit Jesus (v. 2)? At night. **Why at night?** The Scriptures don't tell us. Fear of retribution, losing stature, or embarrassment perhaps. Nicodemus wanted to talk with Jesus one Rabbi to another. It's safe to say that Nicodemus had an earnest desire to know the truth.

What did Nicodemus acknowledge about Jesus (v. 2)? That He was a teacher sent by God since no one could perform such miracles without the direct help of God. However, he did not recognize Jesus as God.

Nicodemus made an introductory comment and how did Jesus respond (v. 3)? Jesus cut to the chase by saying essentially "You're on the pathway to hell Nicodemus. If you want to get to heaven, you must be 'born again.'"

What was the Jews' attitude toward their salvation? To the Jews, being born a Jew was the equivalent of being born into the kingdom of God. Imagine the shocked look on the face of Nicodemus when Jesus told him that his natural birth (as a Jew) along with all he had been taught and had followed religiously was not enough to get him into the kingdom of God and that he must be born again. He thinks he has reserved seats on the 50-yard line of heaven but Jesus tells him otherwise.

What does it mean to be born again? The phrase "born again" literally means "born from above." Nicodemus had a real need. He needed a change of his heart—a spiritual transformation. New birth, being born again, is an act of God whereby eternal life is imparted to the person who believes ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#); [1 Peter 1:3](#); [1 John 5:1](#)).

By repenting and placing our faith in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of our sins, the transformation process begins. It is a transformation of both the heart and the mind ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)). It is done by God. It is a spiritual awakening to the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done. Nicodemus had a physical birth. Now he needed to have a spiritual birth. This transformation process was prophesied in the Old Testament ([Ezekiel 36:26-27](#)).

Nicodemus was confused. He asked Jesus how a man could be born a second time (v. 4). How did Jesus answer him (v. 5)? You must have two births. You must be born of both water and the Spirit. Most take the term "water" to refer to natural birth, while they believe "spirit" refers to one's spiritual re-birth from above. He was saying that a man must first be born naturally ("of water") and then supernaturally ("of the Spirit").

Could "born of water" refer to baptism? Scripture is very clear that water baptism is a testimony to salvation, not a prerequisite for it ([John 1:12, 3:16, 36](#); [Ephesians 2:8-9](#); [Titus 3:5](#)). This encounter happened before Christian baptism was initiated, so the meaning or significance of water baptism would be meaningless to Nicodemus. No matter what the water means, the Spirit is the key. The second birth is the issue at stake.

Application: There is a big difference between being religious and being a Christian. One could not get much more religious than Nicodemus, but our Lord's words make it clear that as "religious" as he was, Nicodemus was not yet saved. Spiritually speaking, Nicodemus was on death row. He was a condemned man.

How does Jesus compare the saving work of the Holy Spirit with the wind (v. 8)? The effects of the wind can be seen, but the wind itself is not seen. Both the Spirit and the wind operate on their own. The wind goes where it wishes and does what it will. Men do not control the wind nor the Spirit. But when the Spirit brings about the new birth and transforms the human heart, the effects are evident.

What does Nicodemus' question indicate (v. 9)? Nicodemus was confused. He was so set in his thinking, that salvation was a done deal for him and all of faithful Israel, that he had a hard time thinking differently. Nicodemus betrayed his ignorance of Old Testament revelation with his question.

In response to Nicodemus' question (v. 9), what did Jesus say to him (vv. 10-11)? You are supposed to be a teacher of the Jews and you don't understand the Old Testament teachings on the new birth ([Ezekiel 36:26-27](#))?

I've told you what I know to be the truth and I've told you what I have seen but you refuse to believe. Jesus was speaking the truth as an eyewitness, but Nicodemus was rejecting His witness.

Why could Jesus speak authoritatively about heavenly things (v. 12)? No one has ever gone into heaven and then come back to earth, able to give clear teaching about divine matters (v. 13). The one exception is Jesus, the Son of Man. He is the "Ladder" between heaven and earth with access to both realms (cf. [John 1:50-51](#)). He "descended" in the Incarnation and "ascended" in the Ascension. He also was in heaven before the Incarnation, and therefore knows the divine mysteries.¹ He could teach because He had unmatched credibility and knowledge.

Jesus had barely begun His ministry, but what did He already know about His mission (vv. 14-15)? He knew how it would end and He knew the purpose for which He was going to die.

The story of the bronze serpent, foreshadows the cross and the salvation which God will provide through the "Son of Man." As the serpent was lifted up, those who looked to the bronze serpent were saved from the death they deserved. So the Son of Man must be "lifted up," so that all those who "look up" to Jesus in faith, trusting in Him to remove the judgment for their sin will be saved from God's wrath.

What is the value of including the story of the bronze serpent? Nicodemus, a learned teacher of the Scriptures, would be very familiar with the Old Testament story of the bronze serpent, and the illustration used by John of Jesus being lifted up would be very clear to him ([Numbers 21:4-9](#)).

What is the message of v. 16? This perhaps best-known verse in the whole Bible expresses the gospel message more clearly and winsomely than any other. It has been labeled as the "Gospel in a nutshell."

What is revealed about God the Father (vv. 16-18)? He has a sovereign plan for all of mankind. A plan that is based on the person and work of His Son. A plan which gives us a picture of the greatest love and the greatest gift.

What is revealed about Jesus the Son? He is the one and only Son of God. His purpose is to save—not condemn—the world. **What is revealed about man?** Man's responsibility is to believe in Jesus.

How do you get to heaven according to vv. 15-18? Three times in these verses, building on the theme of being born again, John is very clear that believing in Jesus is the key to eternal life, i.e. by faith and faith alone.

For a Pharisee like Nicodemus, what would be the most shocking part of v. 16? This verse declares that God's selfless love extends to *the world*, which means that God has purposed to save Gentiles as well as Jews. This was literally beyond the comprehension of many Jews. "Whoever" (or whosoever) is repeated three times in vv. 16-18. There are no limitations based on race, nationality, gender, denomination, social standing, etc. The love of God is amazing, not so much because the world is so *big*, but because the world is so *bad*.

John clarified that God's purpose in sending His Son was not to judge or condemn the world (v. 17). **What is the reason that people are condemned (v. 18)?** For their refusal to believe in Jesus, the One whom God lovingly and graciously has provided as the Savior.

How does John explain the process leading up to mankind's judgment (vv. 19-21)?

V. 19 Jesus is the light who came into the world. But men love darkness not for its own sake but because of what it hides. They want to continue undisturbed in their evil, sinful deeds.

V. 20 Those who love sin and do evil things hate the light, because the light exposes their sinfulness. The best way to reveal the crookedness of one stick is to place a straight stick beside it. Coming into the world as a Perfect Man, the Lord Jesus revealed the crookedness of all other men by His own holiness.

V. 21 People who respond positively to the truth, on the other hand, come to the light, that is, the Lord Jesus, They also humbly acknowledge that the good works that they do are really done through the power and for the glory of God.

¹ Edwin A. Blum, "[John](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 281.